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ABSTRACT

A senior citizen agency in New York State explored the program development needs of the growing number of older women. Data were collected through telephone surveys of approximately 100 older women randomly selected from lists of present members, former members, and older women who had never been associated with the agency. Respondents were asked their interest in participating in programs addressing health, financial affairs, legal affairs, culture/family traditions, or other topics of choice. Respondents were divided into ages 85 and older, 75-84, 65-74, and 55-64. The study found that women aged 85 and older have no desire to become active participants in any type of program for the elderly. Those aged 75-84 were conservative spenders, would pay only for programs of top quality, and preferred to leave a program with something tangible--a booklet or information packet. This age group preferred expert speakers on "instrumental" topics (such as finance and health) and to socialize while learning through self-directed cassettes or videotapes. Women aged 65-74 were too active and too busy to participate in program development in a leadership role but would attend such programs. They were interested in programs with younger women but not with children. Finally, the 55- to 64-year-old women and their anticipated followers, the aging baby boomers, were already involved in many programs; they were interested in information on caregiving and were expected to continue to be active participants in society. They were able to pay small fees for programs. The study concluded that organizations developing programs for the elderly should be careful not to group them into one category of those over age 55, but to do periodic needs assessments to create programs that will serve this varied clientele. (11 references) (KC)

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RETHINKING ADULT AGENCY PROGRAMS: WRITING PROGRAMS FOR OLDER WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

Many organizations offering programs for the elderly base their program development on past perceptions of educational needs and stereotypical views of how learning takes place. Examination of an elderly population in New York state suggests administrators need to rethink their views on clientele needs and learning capabilities. Agencies must be careful not to group the elderly into one category comprised of those over age 55 and expect their needs are similar.

KEY WORDS

Program Planning

Education-Elderly

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations facilitating programs for the elderly appear to base program development efforts on administrators' perceptions of educational needs and stereotypical views of how learning takes place. Agency administrators need to rethink their views about clientele needs and learning capabilities because of a growing base of research that provides insight into the needs of the elderly. This may necessitate new programs, priorities and services provided to the elderly.

Several researchers have examined how educational needs can be developed. For example, McClusky's (1974) categories of older adults' needs encompass five areas: coping, expression, contribution, influence, and transcendence. The content area of these five categories would include: basic adult education, crafts, training, community involvement, and reading groups. In contrast, Londoner (1971) categorized the needs of older adults into two broader areas: (a) instrumental learning, which includes topics such as health, legal affairs, and financial affairs, and (b) expressive learning, which includes crafts, hobbies, and travel experiences. Hiemstra (1972) researched both the needs and interests of older people within this broader base and found "Instrumental activities were perceived by older people as more important than expressive activities" (p. 228). Hiemstra (1976) hypothesized that administrators and program planners for agencies dealing with the elderly should offer more

programs with instrumental content. This article describes a research project that examines this content area.

THE AGENCY EXAMINED

This research focused on a non-profit, United Way member agency formed in 1967 in a northeastern state. Their goal is to improve the quality of life for the older adult community. It is governed by a volunteer board of directors, who exceed age 55. This mission statement honors their desire to "enhance the quality of life for older adults . . . through advocacy, planning, educational programs, direct services, and inter-coordination of community services . . . ." Funding is achieved from fund-raising activities, grants and membership contributions.

CLIENTELE

The majority of the agency's contributing members are self-supporting women. In 1991, the agency's largest contributing group was termed the "old/old membership". This category is comprised of women born in the late 1890's or early 1900's, making the present membership's average age in the nineties. One problem facing the agency is the fact that many members in this latter group are dying and thereby reducing the membership number.

OBJECTIVE

Because of an aging membership problem, the Board of Directors decided to explore program development to encompass the growing number of females in the older population, the

aging baby boomer generation, and corresponding intergenerational considerations. This study was conceived to assess the needs of past, current, and potential members so appropriate programming revisions could be considered. It is anticipated that study's findings will benefit program developers, as well as the local agency.

SUBJECTS

Data collected involved telephone surveying only older women. The participants were randomly selected from confidential lists provided by the agency with information on the following groups: (a) present members, (b) former members who had chosen not to renew their membership or who had requested information from the agency or had participated in a program, but not joined the agency, and (c) older women in the community who had never been associated with the agency.

PROCEDURE

Participants in the telephone survey were first asked if they had ever used the agency's services and to recall in which services they actively participated within the past two years. Concerns of those surveyed were determined by asking if they would be interested in participating in programs addressing such issues as health, financial affairs, legal affairs, culture/family traditions or any topic of interest the individual wanted to site. Those with a disinclination to participate mentioned barriers to participation to include poor health, transportation problems and their per-

ception that agency services were provided for lower socio-economic groups. If a positive response to participation was given, motivation for participation in programs offered to the elderly was then probed.

Respondents were asked their preference of method of instruction within the following categories: social interaction, informal discussion group, classroom/speaker program, one-on-one or self-learning. A last question about willingness to pay a nominal ($5-$10) fee for participating was then asked.

A breakdown of those surveyed is shown on Figure One.

The agency studies chose to divide the sample into the following age categories:

Age 65 and Older	Old/Old Generation
Age 75 to 84	Medium/Old Generation
Age 65 to 74	Sandwich Generation
Age 55 to 64	Babyboomer Generation

FINDINGS

The following findings are presented by these age classifications.

Age 85 and Older

Women in this age group have no desire to become active participants in any type of program for the elderly. Since health problems were prevalent, their predominant concern was daily survival. Disabling health problems and loss of vision confined many to home. Virtually all women in this age group opt not to participate in agency programs.

Figure I

THE STUDY SAMPLE

Age	65+	75-84	64-74	55-64	Unknown
(a) agency member	3	2	12	3	57
(b) non-member	-	-	5	4	19
(c) community resident	2	3	7	4	9
*Answering Machines					15

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* The number of elderly females with message machines was noted as an information source for future surveys. Mailing questionnaires was eliminated as a survey method because of the expense and predicted response rate.

Age 75 to 84

The next generation, born between 1906 and 1915, range in age from 75 to 84. The experience of the Great Depression in the 1930's made them conservative spenders. Women in this age group said they would only spend money on programs of top quality. Many mentioned a preference for leaving a program with something in their hand--a booklet or information packet. Thus, program planners may find value in providing such materials for participants in this age group.

Services women used which left them feeling satisfied were senior health insurance counseling programs and retirement planning programs, "instrumental" program preferences as predicted by Hiemstra in 1976. Healthy women also preferred to participate in activities that included socializing such as informal discussion groups. Overall, this age group preferred speakers, perceived as experts, who disseminated quality information. Thus, program planners should avoid staffing most of their "instrumental" learning experiences with in-house staff members or volunteers. Having the opportunity to ask questions and discuss concerns at the closure of presentations was well received.

Individualized participation was also preferred, such as having a nutritionist speak and discuss individual diets with participants. However, participants who were able to easily leave their environment, expressed a preference to socialize while learning over self-directed learning devices, such as cassette or video tapes.

Age 65 to 74

Based on those interviewed, women age 65 to 75 appear too active and too busy to participate in program development. They are breaking the stereotypes of growing old. Many attended programs at hospitals, government agencies, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), senior citizen centers and churches. Women in this age group mentioned that many of their friends feel they have volunteered throughout the years and now that they are retired, they want to be provided with programs and services. They want to participate in the community, but do not want to commit to leadership roles. Long-term commitment adds unneeded stress to their retirement years.

A 68 year old woman stated she loved the program, Stay Well, because she could socialize with others. A 69 year old woman stated she attends health awareness programs because of the quality of the information received. Another 65 year old woman said, "I'm active and love to be learning new things," but then went on to say she preferred to listen to a speaker and felt speakers with discussion groups were "taken the best by most elderly."

All women in this age group preferred programs that were offered early in the afternoon and on weekdays. Public transportation is readily available during weekdays. Women in this age group suggested these topics as interesting:

Mammograms	How to Grandparent
Estate Planning	Cancer Information

Living Wills — Heart Information

Health — Heart Information

Support groups for diseases like alzheimers

Arthritis

From an educational design viewpoint, the above is valuable information for future planning efforts.

Women were asked if they would be interested in attending programs using a speaker and subsequent discussion group format with younger women, mid-life to older women, older adults only, or children. Not one woman said she objected to attending programs with younger women, but many objected to interactions with children. Many women commented they were caregivers to their grandchildren, especially during the summer months when school was not in session. Related comments from participants were:

> "We had a program at AARP with young ladies and it was taken very well."
>
> "I would be definitely interested in younger women. We need to prepare these young women for what is really going to happen when they get our age."
>
> "There is a language barrier with younger women. We don't talk their talk." This woman expressed a desire to improve communication with younger women and to participate in an intergenerational program.
>
> "I would have liked to have had information on aging sooner. I would like to have talked with older women when I was younger."

According to American Demographics (1991, p. 32), this age group "will want to stay culturally and socially involved with younger people. The extended family will enjoy a renaissance."

Age 55 to 64

The generation including those born between 1926 and 1936, ages 55 to 64, is characterized by American Demographics (1991) as the youngest-marrying generation in the history of the United States, and as generous givers to charity, non-judgmental, and valuing the process instead of end results. They are taking advantage of early retirement plans at age 55 and might benefit from retirement and estate planning seminars. Mary Folger (1989) stated that 85 percent of the elderly are not mentally or physically frail and 75 percent are neither close to or at poverty levels. Those surveyed in this generation mentioned grandchildren or a parent as a concern and therefore could very well be consumers of care-giver information. Many in this generation were already involved in other programs.

CONCLUSION

The aging baby boomer generation will fall into the age 55 to 64 category. They were the flower children, draft protestors and counter-culture activists. The baby boomers are the largest cohort ever to emerge in one fifteen year time span. Roughly 75 million baby boomers were born between 1947 and 1962 (Whaley, p. 20). The impact of the graying baby boomers, who are 51 percent female, will be appreciated as they approach retirement age. Women have a longer lifespan than men, so many will be single and living alone in their later years. "In 2030, those born between 1955 and 1964 will be aged 65 to 74." (Whaley p. 20). Harrison (1991) states

that from "1985 to 2050, the over 55 population will double, and by 2010, because of the maturation of the baby-boom generation, one quarter of the population will be over 55." These older baby boomers and those even older will number over 60 million people and should represent about 20 percent of the population of the United States by the year 2000. From the time they baby boomers emerged as consumers, they have been the target group for programs, products and services. This group will cause agencies dealing with older adults to rethink policies and recast programs.

The trend in the United States is to cut financial support to those agencies providing such services. Agencies dealing with the elderly must write programs that will generate income from participants instead of relying on federal grants for financial support. An increase in the per capita income will enable this generation to pay nominal fees for program services. In 1990, the baby boomers controlled one-third of the country's discretionary income (Whaley, p. 29).

In the American Demographics article, "The Cycle of Generations", one professor describes the baby boomers as, "A generation that when young trusted nobody over 30, today trusts nobody under 30." As with the 65 to 74 year old generation, surveyed participants in this younger generation preferred not to participate in programs with children. Intergenerational conflict has been high in their lifetime and may continue to be into the future.

According to Fuller (1989), characteristics of women at age 60 and older include: social bonding between older women, loss of primary responsibility for their children, lengthy marriage encounters, outliving spouse, strong family and friend networks, and the institutions that have the greatest impact on their lives are the church and the economy.

Predictions from Whaley (p. 32) that should also be considered in writing programs for baby boomers include more women actively participating in politics, and lobbying for more liberal policies toward euthanasia and discontinuation of costly life support measures for those who are judged hopelessly ill. Female support should be strong for a resurgence of cooperatives for food, housing, health care, energy . . . especially among the old. Greater participation in public and community affairs should be expected.

IMPLICATIONS

There is a need for organizations dealing with the elderly to rethink their programs to accommodate a changing constituency. Care should be taken not to market programs to elderly individuals who have been erroneously stereotyped. Topics of interest to the elderly are: health related issues, the aging process, political and environmental information programs, financial programs and legal information programs. Thus, agency administrators need to consider providing both expressive programs and instrumental

learning programs; but, to accommodate the needs of the aging baby boomers, should concentrate on instrumental programs.

Further research is needed to address how to attract instrumental activity participants. Agencies will have to rethink program planning to market to the aging generations. Membership need assessments will need to be completed frequently before agencies develop their programs for the elderly. Agencies must be careful not to group the elderly into one category comprised of those over age 55, and expect their needs are similar.

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